

REFLECTIONS ON *Growth*

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Capacity Building: “The Most Compelling Concern in the Coming Years”

Near the end of its 27 December 2005 message that presented the framework of this Five Year Plan, the Universal House of Justice explained that “capacity at the level of the cluster to sustain growth will remain the most compelling concern in the coming years.” Experience in the clusters with intensive programs of growth has demonstrated that whether the friends are considering the strengthening of the institute process, the quality of core activities, the tempo of teaching, or the effectiveness of the scheme of coordination, the key to sustainability in all these areas is building capacity—the capacity of tutors, coordinators, teachers, and cluster agencies.

Although the importance of capacity building is generally recognized, what it actually implies, or more specifically, what actions should be carried out to gradually raise capacity in individuals and institutions is something less well understood. No doubt this will constitute a critical area of learning in the next year and long after the goal of launching 1,500 intensive programs of growth is achieved. In the selections that follow we can learn from the firsthand accounts of believers who share insights from their own experience about building capacity in others who are serving at the cluster level.

In the first story, a believer who had been a tutor and active participant in cluster activities describes how she was closely accompanied after she was given the challenging assignment of serving as a cluster institute coordinator. The second account presents the experience of a national junior youth coordinator in supporting and enhancing the capacity of a cluster coordinator. In the third piece, a resource person for expansion and consolidation shares thoughts on his experience in accompanying cluster agencies to a higher level of functioning. And in the final story, a regional junior youth coordinator reflects on her efforts to recognize and build capacity in both cluster-level coordinators and animators.

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Colombia

A believer relates how the nurturing and accompanying she received from an Auxiliary Board member to effectively carry out core activities prepared her for serving as a cluster coordinator. She entered the institute process as a youth and quickly grew in her capacity to serve. She strove to transmit to the believers with whom she interacted the vision of the Plan, the attitude of learning, and the spirit of encouragement that she had gained from the Board member.

The Auxiliary Board member, who at that time was serving as coordinator of the sequence of courses, always accompanied me, and I am thankful to him from the bottom of my heart for that. For me, he has been like a father guiding his child, giving me the opportunity to consult freely with him. I always expect a sincere and loving answer, which is always focused on the path of service.

One day, I was invited to a meeting to evaluate the three-month cycle of our cluster and was told that the institute had thought of me to serve as coordinator of study circles. It seemed like such a great responsibility. I knew that the sequence of courses

was vital to the process of preparing individuals from different communities for service. Sometimes at night I was so nervous that I could not sleep, but it was an opportunity that I could not miss, an opportunity to learn and thank God and Bahá'u'lláh for being able to serve Him. It was a unique challenge. I was moved; I cried; I could not believe it. I felt the need to explore many things that were hidden within me and that I had never developed. I finally accepted, and now I realize that we learn as we work. The more we work, the more we learn, and the Divine Hosts are accompanying us if we work with purity of motive, if we maintain an attitude of learning. This is an important point for any coordinator who wants to really advance. If we lose this attitude, we do not benefit from the contributions of all those around us.

The goal was clear: sustain what we had, strive to maintain the dynamics of the study circles, continue growing, mobilize more tutors, maintain a constant flow advancing in the human-resource “pyramid,” accompany the tutors so that they keep their regularity and enthusiasm, and use the opportunity of helping others to grow to the extent we all grew. I was aware that if I myself were not willing and enthusiastic, I would not be able to convey anything to others, nor encourage them. This was a requirement for being close to and accompanying the tutors, participants, and the parents of the participants. In this process, I discovered that it is very important to be friends with everyone—even the man in the store, the driver, everyone—to feel, in whichever community we arrive, that our identity is to be a Bahá'í, that everyone knows that, and that we are not strangers among them. The coordinator is not on a different level; we are all equal. We should feel equal to everyone, especially in communities where people arise to carry out meritorious services, and be always thankful and make them feel that that is, in fact, the purpose of life—to be able to serve others, whether within or outside the communities where they reside.

In order to maintain the dynamics of the study circles as well as a constant flow of resources, the coordinator should always be alert to everything, be organized, and delineate a work plan to be systematically developed during the cycle. He or she should also be friends with the participants, greet them lovingly, ask them about their progress in their study, and see whether they are happy. If someone is not attending the study circle, visit them at their home and always convey to the families the importance of the study circle. This is highly useful for maintaining the dynamics of studying courses.

Accompanying has to take place for tutors as well as participants. Tutors should not be left a long time by themselves; they need a lot of support both in the activity and in general. Deepening on quotations about different topics with the tutors helps them broaden their perspective and understand even more the value of their opportunity to serve. When I visit tutors, I try to help them reflect on the importance of helping others; we should all remember that at some point someone did the same for us, was patient with us, and helped us grow. We learn not for ourselves, but to offer it to others and to serve humanity.

Sometimes we feel tired because this requires a lot of will, trust in God, and sacrifice. But it is an opportunity and a privilege given to us. When I think about Bahá'u'lláh's promise for this day and His love, it gives me the strength to forget about my rest and continue striving and advancing.

Malaysia

The national junior youth coordinator recounts the approach he used to enhance the effectiveness of the junior youth coordinator in one particular cluster. The specific suggestions he made, coupled with his personal support, helped to build her capacity and also set an example of how to accompany the animators.

When the national coordinator visited the cluster, the first thing he did was to meet with the cluster coordinator and discuss her experience in implementing the junior youth program. He discovered that the animators in her area seemed unwilling to attend animator gatherings, so improving their skill levels was challenging. He offered to assist her in developing a closer relationship with the animators, and together the two developed a plan to address this. His account follows:

I suggested that if she were to build strong relationships with the animators, she would have to go from being a “statistician” to being a friend. Regular visits to animators could serve to build good rapport.

We went through the names of participants currently in the institute sequence and listed those who had completed Ruhi Institute Book 5 and those who were in progress. We listed the names of those now serving as animators and those who have served as animators in the past, and we then planned our visits to these friends.

During the first visits, I helped the cluster coordinator think of possible topics for discussions during our visits: service projects, complementary activities, visits to parents, problems with the animator gatherings, the level of participation of junior youth in formulating the group’s activities and discussions, and so on. She learned quickly and introduced these elements into her conversations with the animators in subsequent visits. Her sincerity and humility touched the hearts of the animators, and I could see that, as a result, they now consulted with her about their problems. One, in particular, expressed that he needed help with the expansion of the group and also visits to parents, and she quickly planned a visiting campaign with him.

With individuals who we thought could start junior youth groups, we were direct and honest about the purpose of our visit. We asked if they would like to become an animator and if we could help them form a group by accompanying them to invite participants and explain the program to parents. With those who have agreed to start new groups, we set dates for the invitations.

As for how to improve the animator gatherings, I suggested that we hold a skills training on the “roles of an animator” during the time of my visit. On that day, 13 animators and potential animators came. During the reflection, one animator said that she now knows that the work of an animator is not to plan activities for the junior youth but to assist them in their planning and support them in their endeavors. I pray and hope that future animator gatherings will continue to have high attendance and that the animators realize the importance of adopting a posture of learning.

Papua New Guinea

A resource person from Australia was asked to spend time in a cluster on a remote island of Papua New Guinea. This cluster, designated as a potential learning site, has shown high receptivity but could not sustain its core activities and teaching work without outside assistance. This believer focused his attention on strengthening the capacity of the cluster agencies. Within a few weeks, the local believers were able to take full ownership of the plan.

Throughout this period, the cluster agencies were accompanied by the resource person as they began planning, coordinating, and facilitating activities for the next cycle of growth. In addition to one-on-one accompanying, he provided training with a strong focus on the institute process and on the process and implications of carrying out an intensive program of growth. This training included study of key documents from the Bahá'í World Centre.

The believer assisted the local friends to reflect on previous cycles of growth and their challenges in consolidating large numbers of new believers. A number of deficiencies were identified and discussed. The friends also came to see clearly that systematic plans needed to be carried out at the very place growth was occurring—in neighborhoods—and not through cluster-wide events. The resource person recounts how he aided the local believers to analyze their cluster.

I had a lovely experience with analysis. The way analysis was approached was to first reflect on the lessons learned and to identify what needs to be adjusted and what learning is to be carried through. Second was to study relevant documents from the World Centre. In this way, the friends were aware of the strategies and their basic implications for the growth process. These strategies were written on a chart visible during the analysis process. Question by question, each cluster agency member went through the framework for analysis in a guided consultation to answer the question, derive its implications, and to apply the required strategy. During this process, further questions were identified that needed to be part of their analysis. Once the framework for analysis had been completed, a list of all the required strategies was compiled into another chart. A diagram of the cycle of activity was drawn, and one by one the strategies were placed on the cycle timeline; some through consultation were identified as having to happen more than once a cycle. At this point, responsibilities for the activities were assigned to the respective cluster agencies, who from thereon would plan.

One of the insights gained during this exercise was that the most receptive segment of the population, which would also be the one most likely to quickly arise to serve, was the youth. The members of the cluster agencies also realized that the notion that capacity was linked solely to schooling was false. After reflection, they came to regard capacity for service as not only intellectual capacity but also the qualities that would lead believers to selfless service.

Another fruit of learning to analyze was the decision to change the methods employed during teaching campaigns. Instead of groups of teachers going to visit entire family groups at night, as had been done in the past, the teaching would be carried out with teaching teams of only two persons each. The teams would seek out youth during the daytime and teach one person at a time. They would take with them copies of Book 1 so that the seeker or new believer could immediately be introduced to the institute process. Each evening, those taught during the

day would be visited and assisted to share their new faith with their families. The teams would reflect on their actions often and make adjustments as the teaching campaign progressed. When this method was tried, it proved to be much more effective than previous approaches.

Furthermore, for the first time, consolidation was planned from the beginning. In preparation for that second phase of the cycle, refresher courses for those who had already been through the institute courses were planned for the period prior to the intensive teaching campaign. This built capacity for service among the believers of the cluster and helped the cluster agencies to prepare an environment in which new believers could be quickly nurtured. Home visits and intensive study circles were planned for the consolidation phase, naturally transforming the teaching campaign into an institute campaign.

By the time the resource person departed from the cluster, there were 50 new believers, of whom 15 had finished Book 1. Another 30 believers, who had entered the 50-day institute campaign, had advanced to Book 6.

United Kingdom

The regional coordinator for the junior youth program in England explains how one of the challenges at this stage in the development of the core activities is to identify believers who have both the capacity and requisite experience to serve as cluster coordinators. She describes how she is striving to build capacity in the junior youth coordinators and at the same time to nurture animators who show the potential to serve as cluster coordinators in the future.

The coordinators that I have learned the most from are those with whom I can act, reflect, and consult. Assuming a learning mode has helped me to develop better relationships with the coordinators and learn what they are doing.

There have been a number of challenges in developing close collaboration with some of the coordinators. Many have very busy schedules and are not able to prioritize attending regional gatherings and other coordinator related activities. A number of them do not have experience animating a regular junior youth group, and do not feel they have enough time to both animate their own junior youth groups and coordinate the services of other animators. With limited experience, they struggle to accompany others in activities they don't have experience with. The challenge is now to raise up the capacity of others to serve as future coordinators.

In light of these challenges, the questions we have been asking ourselves are: How do we identify cluster coordinators? What qualities are vital to a good coordinator? And, how do we accompany junior youth animators to become coordinators?

One benefit of holding regional gatherings has been interacting with animators who, I believe, could potentially serve as cluster coordinators in the future. Early this year a regional gathering for experienced animators was held, which 45 people attended. Animators made detailed plans for how they would develop their junior youth group or the junior youth program in their area. I kept in touch closely with the animators who I felt were the most receptive to encouragement and who had the most realistic plans. After four months, a follow-up gathering was held where the animators who made significant effort were invited to attend. Additionally, some new

animators who had shown dedication and commitment to this activity were also asked to participate. From the nearly 50 people who attended the two gatherings, it became clear which of the animators were capable of planning, acting, and reflecting in light of their experience. Some of the more experienced friends were encouraged to learn how to expand their junior youth groups and develop relationships with the families; others were encouraged to train others and accompany them to establish junior youth groups.

I have started working more closely with the animators who have the greatest potential. A few of them that I have been visiting regularly have come to stay with me in Oxford where I have taken them on home visits to learn about working with youth from the wider community. Interacting with these animators for almost a year has allowed me the opportunity to see which friends are able to create the time in their lives to direct their energies toward the growth of the junior youth program.

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